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SUBJECT: NIGER: CIVIL SOCIETY PROTESTS AGAINST NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
BENEFITS PACKAGE

REF: NIAMEY 509

¶1. On May 21, the Movement of Citizens for Peace and the Republic (a group of civil society associations) organized a peaceful march and rally to protest the recent bill increasing National Assembly members' benefits (reftel). Thousands of demonstrators marched to the National Assembly square, where they expressed discontent with the measure and renewed a call to President Tandja that he not promulgate the bill into law and that he repeal any laws that grant "exorbitant benefits" to current and former government officials. Similar protests took place in Zinder, the Niger's second largest city.

¶2. Concurrently, the Citizens' Convergence (a new umbrella group made up of labor unions, human rights associations, women's organizations and journalists) issued a statement on current national issues, including the National Assembly benefits package. The Citizens' Convergence challenged the bill as a "violation of the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and social justice provided by the constitution" in a context of scarce resources. The group also requested that the president reject the bill. It demanded the government to revise the requirements for candidacy to the National Assembly and to establish the BEPC (middle school diploma) as a minimum educational level for future deputies. It further called on the government to revise and harmonize the compensation system applicable to senior officials. It asserted taking a "historical responsibility to thwart the parliamentary conspiracy against the people."

¶3. Comment: On the eve of these protests, the National Assembly called a day-long special session in an attempt to explain to the public that there was much ado about nothing. During the debate, most interventions aimed at showing that the media and public opinion had been misled by some "petty" intellectuals and "renegade" politicians including one of their colleagues who opposed the bill (reftel).

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